

Waterloo Courier     Editorial

The last thing our troops need is a festering morale problem that should have been dealt with long ago.

That could be the case however, for Iowa National Guard members who are being redeployed while still being owed benefits for a tour of Iraq that ended in 2007.

U.S. Reps. Bruce Braley, Dave Loebsack and Leonard Boswell - along with Sens. Chuck Grassley and Tom Harkin - are among three dozen members of Congress expected to sign a letter to Secretary of Defense Robert Gates expressing "serious concern" with the delay in Post-Deployment/Mobilization Respite Absence benefits.

Respite leave was designed to provide service members - regular Army, as well as Guard and Reserve - who were deployed beyond established rotation cycles, additional time to reintegrate into civilian life. It is also designed to help retain service members who have experienced long tours.

Most of the Iowans owed respite leave reimbursement are part of the Waterloo-headquartered Iowa Army National Guard 1st Battalion, 133rd Infantry, which was mobilized in fall 2005 and returned from Iraq in July 2007. It includes units in Waterloo, Dubuque, Oelwein, Iowa Falls and Charles City. Two 1/133rd soldiers were killed and approximately 35 wounded during that deployment.

Because of a delay in implementation by the individual services, many soldiers have not received their benefits. The Defense Department believed it lacked the legal authority to provide benefits retroactively. So Congress included language in the 2010 National Defense Authorization Act, which was signed by President Barack Obama in October, to provide the DOD with the legal authority to pay the benefits retroactively.

According to Lt. Col. Gregory Hapgood of the Iowa Army National Guard, many members already are being deployed again, and others are looking at redeployment in the near future. Still, the back pay has not been delivered.

Our state's congressmen and senators have been at the forefront of restoring this lost respite pay and we applaud their efforts in untangling the bureaucratic red tape.

Meanwhile, it's a pretty good sign that our government is much too cumbersome if we cannot efficiently disburse this pay to those who have already served at - and are now returning to - the front lines.